



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Framing Egypt : Roman literary perceptions of Egypt from Cicero to Juvenal

Leemreize, M.E.C.

Citation

Leemreize, M. E. C. (2016, November 9). *Framing Egypt : Roman literary perceptions of Egypt from Cicero to Juvenal*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/44023>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/44023>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/44023> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Leemreize, M.E.C.

Title: Framing Egypt : Roman literary perceptions of Egypt from Cicero to Juvenal

Issue Date: 2016-11-09

Conclusion

The present study addressed three research questions. The first was related to the two traditional ways in which Roman literary references to Egypt were explained in previous scholarly literature: as negative stereotypes of contemporary (Roman) Egypt or positive attitudes towards ancient Egypt. This study took these two ‘traditional’ ways as its starting point and explored in chapters I and II the relationship between them and literary references to Egypt. The foundation of the present study was an investigation of all kinds of references to Egypt in (Greco-) Roman literary sources covering the late first century BCE to the first century CE – hence avoiding a focus on one author, subject or period. Based on this investigation several texts have been selected as case-study to demonstrate the representation of Egypt in Roman literature and society. Chapter I on Pliny the Elder’s Egypt set the scene by arguing for the existence of another concept than the ‘traditional’ concepts (negative stereotypes of contemporary Egypt or positive attitudes towards ancient Egypt): Egypt as an integral part of Rome. Elaborating on the notion that references to Egypt in Flavian times, at least in Pliny the Elder, could not always be explained by negative stereotyping or positive attitudes, chapter II showed by a close reading of Propertius 3.11 that even references to Egypt in Augustan texts could be framed in many ways which could not unambiguously be labeled ‘negative’ or ‘positive’.

The second research question concerned the function of concepts of Egypt by approaching Roman literary representations from the notion of self-representation. By emphasizing the larger context, chapter III showed that almost every use of negative stereotypes in texts from Cicero to Juvenal had its own specific effect on Roman self-representation instead of simply Othering, i.e. the general function attributed to negative stereotyping. Whereas negative stereotypes of Egypt received much attention in previous scholarly literature, positive perceptions of ancient Egypt were rather neglected and a good explanation for the use of a positive perception has not been given

hitherto. Chapter IV investigated the use of positive attitudes towards Egypt and demonstrated that positive literary perceptions of ancient Egypt also had a function in terms of self-definition by looking at Tibullus 1.7.

Regarding the third research question that dealt with the importance of Actium for Roman perceptions of Egypt, this thesis argued that the central place given to Actium and Augustan poetry needs to be reconsidered. Below I will deal with the conclusions of these three research questions in depth.

In chapter I, Pliny the Elder's rendering of Egypt in his encyclopedic work the *Natural History* was compared to the two traditional concepts: negative perceptions of contemporary Egypt versus positive attitudes towards ancient Egypt. There are hundreds of references to Egypt made throughout the 36 books of the *Natural History*, touching on various Egyptian topoi ranging from zoological descriptions of Egyptian animals to juicy anecdotes about Cleopatra. Together they present the most comprehensive picture of Egypt available through Roman eyes. The myriad of references in the *Natural History* made it impossible to take a limited perspective, such as focusing on Cleopatra or the Nile only. At the same time they presented a good overview of the scope of possible Roman attitudes towards Egypt. Hence, by starting with Pliny the Elder's Egypt, the risk of becoming bogged down in normative and fixated frameworks was lowered.

Using modern studies that reveal the interrelationship between the contents of the *Natural History* and geopolitical views of Flavian times, this thesis showed that neither traditional concept of Egypt was prominently present in Pliny's encyclopedia. Firstly, I argued that Egypt is not perceived as particularly ancient in the *Natural History*. Although Pliny hints at positive Roman perceptions of Egypt's antiquity, he focuses on the here and now. He seems to refer to Egyptian antiquity only when it contributes positively to the status of Rome. This seems to follow the general aims and purposes of the *Natural History*, which are to emphasize the city of Rome's central position in the Roman world. Secondly, this thesis maintained that in the *Natural History*, Egypt is neither unfamiliar nor exotic, i.e. it is not perceived to be the negative stereotypical Other. In contrast, Egypt is rendered as known territory. Pliny's accurate knowledge of Egypt seems to be derived from administrative and topographical information that the Romans needed to govern this province properly. Regions where Romans had hardly set foot before – and as a result were unfamiliar to them – served as Roman border regions in the *Natural History*, demarcating the Roman world from the unRoman world. The notion

that Roman knowledge and conquest are fundamentally related to each other in the *Natural History* is not new, but it has important effects on how Egypt is conceptualized when placed in the discussion about Roman perceptions of Egypt. As the region Egypt is presented as known, conquered territory, it is clearly mapped inside the Roman empire of the *Natural History*. Extraordinary people whose extreme abnormalities are presented in the few ethnographies in the *Natural History* live in those regions outside the known world. Since Egypt is a known region, Pliny did not include an ethnography of the Egyptians. Hence, the Egyptian people seem to be as ordinary as everybody else living in the Roman world. Moreover, Pliny's exhaustive description of Egyptian flora and fauna that are foreign to Rome and Italy does not turn Egypt in the exotic Other, because including the 'exotic' is part of Pliny's strategy to encompass the Roman world in its entirety and his urge to demonstrate the interconnectivity of all parts of this world. Thus, in the *Natural History*, another concept of Egypt is revealed: Egypt as an integral part of the Roman Empire.

This thesis argues that an answer to the question of why Pliny the Elder conceptualized Egypt in this particular way lies in the overall message of his work. The *Natural History* aims to celebrate the Roman world in all its variety but, in particular, the center of this world: Rome. Throughout the *Natural History* Rome appears as the point of reference. The many comparisons between foreign 'marvels' with those of Rome serve as an example of this. For instance, Pliny notes that the channel of the Tiber turns out to be as deep as that of the Nile and that Augustus' efforts in erecting an obelisk surpassed those of the Egyptian pharaohs. This pattern of comparisons and emulations that can be found throughout the *Natural History* not only involves admired Egyptian items and achievement. The negative Egyptian/eastern manner of luxury is also emulated by Roman examples. Cleopatra's decadence is, for instance, outdone by that of some Romans. Roman emulation, then, does not only have positive effects in terms of Roman self-representation.

In the *Natural History* foreign items were not only compared to Roman ones, they were also brought to Rome. I argued that the transportation of Egyptian animals and objects involved more than a physical transportation. Pliny's account of the transportation of the obelisks to Rome can be seen as a good example of this. In his discussion of the Campus Martius obelisk – the 'so-called' Horologium obelisk – the original function of the obelisk as a dedication to the sun is incorporated for Roman purposes: the obelisk is turned

into a meridian, a device that measures the sun's shadow. In this account Pliny makes the obelisk a symbol for a deep history of competition between pharaohs. By inscribing Augustus into this tradition, not the object *sec* is incorporated, but merely Egypt's antiquity. Thus, Pliny provides Rome with an admired and extensive history. Hence, conceptualizing 'Egypt' as an integral part of the Roman Empire could enhance Rome's status.

Other examples in this thesis demonstrated that the concept of Egypt as an integral part of the Roman empire can be discerned from earlier sources, too. For instance, the same kind of imperial incorporation of Egypt is used in Tibullus 1.7 (chapter IV), where a notion of the *Orbis Romanum* is displayed by the geographical progression that circles from Rome to the (south) east through territories where Messalla conducted his military campaigns and back to Rome again. Here, too, after a close reading of this poem the message seems to be that Egypt intrinsically belonged to the Roman Empire. The same kind of concept is also found in a text of a slightly later date, in Pliny the Younger's *Panegyricus* that I discussed in chapter III. Like his uncle, Pliny the Younger describes the Roman Empire as an interconnected world of which Egypt was firmly part. The function of the concept of Egypt as an integral part of the Roman Empire in Tibullus 1.7 and Pliny the Younger seems to be similar to that of Pliny the Elder: the incorporation of Egypt (features of it) enhances the status of Rome (and/or Romans like Messalla or Trajanus). The features are different, however. In the case of Pliny the Elder's account of the obelisks and in the case of Tibullus 1.7, the focus is on Egypt's antiquity. In the case of Pliny the Younger, it is Egypt's economic wealth. The appropriation of features of Egypt can also have negative effects on the Self. In Juvenal, *Satire* 15, discussed in chapter IV, animal worship is framed as utterly foreign/Egyptian in the first part. In the second part, however, it is framed as an example of how low human nature has sunk. The opposition between Rome and Egypt has vanished in such a way that a former Egyptian custom can be used to illustrate a negative feature of all humans, the Romans included.

Starting with Pliny's *Natural History*, a work that is neither poetic nor Augustan, chapter I stressed that to determine which concept of Egypt is used, the general aims and purposes of the work, generic aspects and historical contexts are key. Simply extracting one reference to Egypt out of a text and labeling it as containing *the* Roman perception of Egypt does not do justice to the multifarious messages of Egypt in the Roman literary discourse. Chapter II, which (re)turned to Augustan poetry, verified this conclusion.

In chapter II, the various ways in which a particular Egyptian topos, Cleopatra, could be portrayed were explored. Although the description of Cleopatra changes according to different genres and at different times, she seems to be inextricably linked to the concept of negative stereotypes in the context of the Battle of Actium. Especially in Propertius 3.11, she seems to be rendered as Rome's antipode. However, I argue that she is actually framed in four different ways in this poem of Propertius. Besides the fact that she *is* conceptualized as the stereotypical Other, as Rome's antipode, she is also conceptualized as a Greek mythological woman, framed as the signal mark of shame (*una nota*) branded on Rome, and presented as a drunken suicide. In the context of Roman self-reflection, the four different frames have different outcomes. In the case of Cleopatra rendered as a Greek mythological woman, she is framed as familiar to Romans and this has positive effects on the speaker's portrayal in the poem. The other three frames, each in their own way, make Cleopatra look bad. However, none of these three negative 'alienating' frames contributes positively to the representation of Rome. Whereas the frame of Cleopatra as mythological is engaged with the position of the speaker and his lover, the other three frames seem to put forward a critical view on Rome's own negative conduct.

Prop. 3.11 is not the only example of a text in which different concepts of Egypt appear. Regarding Martialis 8.36.1-4, discussed in the Introduction, I argued that Egypt was simultaneously approached positively and negatively to enhance the status of Roman wonders such as Domitian's palace. Likewise, in Tibullus 1.7.28, the use of different conceptualizations of Egypt does not seem to be unintentional, as discussed in chapter IV. It presents two different concepts even in the same sentence. Here the Egyptian youth (*pubes*) is said to be barbaric (*barbara*) and learned (*docta*), recalling negative and positive feelings, respectively. In Tibullus 1.7.28, the two concepts of Egypt foster an ethnographic approach to Egypt. This activates concepts of Egypt known from previous ethnographic works such as Herodotus' second book, Strabo's 17th book, and particularly Diodorus Siculus' first book.

Chapters I and II focused on how Egypt was framed in a particular text, and thus answered my first research question. By relating references to Egypt to the two traditional concepts, they not only revealed another concept of Egypt (as an integral part of the Roman Empire), they also demonstrated that one text could contain many messages about Egypt. Chapters I and II anticipated chapters III and IV by discussing the effects of a particular

conceptualization in terms of Roman self-representation. In both chapters, it became clear that a particular concept cannot be understood to have had one single effect on Roman self-representation. For instance, chapter I argued that conceptualizing Egypt as an integral part of the Self can have positive as well as negative effects. Chapter II suggested that framing Cleopatra negatively did not have status-enhancing effects on the Self. In chapter III the function of one particular concept of Egypt, Roman stereotypes, was explored further for its effects on Roman self-representation.

In chapter III, I discussed negative Roman stereotypes which have traditionally been the main focus of attention and were generally interpreted as functioning as an antipode to emphasise good Roman behavior. Instead of just lumping all negative Roman stereotypes together and explaining them as Othering, I have analyzed in depth the discursive and literary contexts of some prominent texts on the Roman literary representation of Egypt. Discussing them in chronological order, it became apparent, firstly, that not all negative stereotypes of Egypt were intended to form a contrast between Egypt and Rome. In Pliny the Younger, Egypt is rendered as an integral part of the Roman empire. Stereotypically rendering Egypt as ‘puffed up’ (*ventosa*) and ‘arrogant’ (*insolens*) functions to cover up the reality of Roman dependence on Egyptian corn. Secondly, negative stereotypes are in most cases not used to support Roman self-esteem. In Cicero’s *Pro Rabirio Postumo* 35, the stereotype used can be called informative, while in Cicero’s *De Natura Deorum*, in Lucan’s *Bellum Civile* and in Juvenal’s Satire 15, the negative stereotypes seem to form a good start to discuss one’s own standards. Particularly in Lucan and Juvenal, the opposition between Us and Them is not used to present a positive picture of Rome, but to discuss Roman mistakes and responsibilities. Only in the Augustan age do they seem to predominantly function in order to create two distinguished parties in favor of Augustus in the context of civil war. But even here the message may have been more nuanced than previously suggested, as I have shown in chapter II in my discussion of Propertius 3.11. Chapter III clarified that the notion of Roman self-representation is helpful in understanding the concept of negative Roman stereotypes of Egypt. Chapter IV reveals that this notion also contributes to our understanding of positive Roman evaluations of Egypt’s antiquity, which are present in ancient sources from Cicero to Tacitus and beyond.

In chapter IV, I argued that in the works of Horace, Propertius, Martial and Frontinus, references to the pyramids, which were the main tokens of ancient

Egypt, show that Egypt could function as a means to contribute constructively to Roman self-representation. Likewise, in Tacitus' account of Germanicus' sightseeing trip to Egypt, ancient Egypt serves to characterize Germanicus. Regarding Tibullus 1.7, I maintained that the concept of ancient Egypt is fundamental to understand this poem. By framing Egypt ethnographically, a literary tradition that is manifest above all in Diodorus Siculus' treatment comes the fore. I argued that in Tibullus 1.7, ancient Egypt is rendered as dominated by Rome and integrated in the Roman Empire. As such it contributes positively to the image of the addressee of Tibullus 1.7, Messalla, and to Rome.

By analyzing Tibullus 1.7, an Augustan poem about an Egyptian god, I responded to a scholarly discussion about its relationship to Augustan policy towards Egyptian gods. According to some scholars, Tibullus' positive image of Egypt and its god Osiris needs to be explained as containing some kind of critique towards Augustus as he banned the Egyptian gods from within the *pomerium* in 28 BCE. Discussing the exact measure taken by Augustus and pointing out miscellaneous politics towards Egyptian cults in the Late Republic, I argued that the relationship is highly speculative. Instead of taking a historical approach to explain Tibullus 1.7, I maintained a focus on the literary context. I showed that the Augustan literary representation of the Egyptian god Isis, a topic strongly related to Osiris, is multidimensional. Like the meandering Roman regulation of Egyptian cults suggests, the Egyptian gods are sometimes depicted as unwanted and sometimes as beneficial. This chapter demonstrated that each use of a particular reference to Egypt needs to be explained according to its context. As chapters III and IV showed that positive as well as negative perceptions of Egypt can be explained as having a function in terms of self-definition, they answered the second hypothesis/question of this thesis.

The third research question concerned the role of Actium in the Roman discourse on Egypt. This thesis argues for a reconsideration of the central place given to Actium and Augustan poetry in scholarly discussions about Roman perceptions of Egypt. Firstly, I have shown that the effects of negative stereotypes on Roman perceptions of Egypt were not as great as previously thought. Although they appear in the few extant Augustan works (and we do not know how much literature has been lost), they received relatively much attention, leading to incorrect assumptions. One example of this concerns Augustan legal restrictions on the cults of Isis as described in Dio Cassius

53.3.4 (chapter IV). These regulations have been related to an Augustan rejection of Egypt and, as a result, were interpreted as a complete ban on the cults of Isis. But when similar literary sources are taken into consideration, the Augustan restrictions on the cults of Isis probably involved a ban within the *pomerium*, but at the same time a promotion of them outside the heart of the city. Moreover, based on their context, Augustan literary references to Isis also show a more varied attitude towards this goddess than just a hostile, Oriental goddess who fought against Rome, as I argued in chapter IV. Secondly, post-Augustan Roman texts containing negative Roman stereotypes of Egypt do not necessarily reflect on Augustan poetry and the Battle of Actium. In chapter III it became clear that the later literature uses negative stereotypes in a different way than most Augustan poetry does. The Battle of Actium is a very specific context in which negative perceptions of Egypt have a different connotation than they do in non-Actium contexts. Juvenal, for instance, uses animal worship in his Satire 15 in a similar way to Cicero, i.e. to start a moral discussion about Roman conventions and standards. Thirdly, other concepts than Egypt as the stereotypical Other are present even in Augustan poetry. In Tibullus 1.7, Egypt is framed as particularly ancient and as an integral part of the Roman world by referring to the literary tradition of Herodotus and Diodorus Siculus. Their works were not unfamiliar to the Augustan public. Likewise, the concept of Egypt's admired antiquity was found in Augustan poetry such as that of Horace and Propertius.

Hence, the overall study of Roman literary references to Egypt as presented in the present thesis shows that they vary greatly, are context-dependent, and cannot be rightly understood when interpreted only within the normative and fixated frameworks of negative perceptions of contemporary Egypt or positive perceptions of Egypt's antiquity. It also suggests that approaching Roman literary references to Egypt from the notion of self-representation is useful to understand and explain their multifarious and sometimes contradictory messages. Egyptian culture was omnipresent in Rome, in the material culture as well as in the literature. This observation does not mean that every reference to Egypt is thus 'Roman'. On the contrary, Egypt was occasionally framed as the Other. Yet the omnipresence of Egypt in the Roman literature is of major importance when the Roman identity is at stake. Egypt, then, is neither only the Other, nor only the Self, but always a polyvalent notion in terms of identity-making.